

Creating Partnerships: Computer Training with Assistive Technology for Senior Adults

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Setting the Stage:

According to the 2011 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) a CDC governed entity, the prevalence of seniors 65 and over who consider themselves to have vision problems is 27.4%, or 5.4 million. By the year 2020, US Census estimates that the senior population will comprise 20% of the population. Of that group, the number of visually impaired senior adults is expected to double from 2015 rates.

Agency Overview:

The mission of the South Carolina Commission for the Blind (SCCB) is to provide quality, individualized vocational rehabilitation services, independent living services, and prevention of blindness services to blind and visually impaired consumers leading to competitive employment and social and economic

History of the Older Blind Program at SCCB:

The South Carolina Commission for the Blind's Older Blind Program was established in 1984 with assistance through a Federal Grant from the Department of Education. It is based in Columbia, South Carolina, and services are also offered in three district offices strategically located throughout the state, including Greenville, Charleston, and Conway.

The Independent Living Services program is operated in accordance with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended in 1998 and with the applicable South Carolina statutes.

All services offered through the Older Blind Program are provided to assist consumers in achieving independence in their daily living. Consumers are encouraged to participate in the development of their Independent Living Plan by exercising informed choice.

The Program is designed to be flexible and to meet individualized needs. The focus must be directed toward independence in the home and community. (Older Blind Policy Manual, 2008)

The Older Blind Program serves people 55 and older who are not seeking employment, but who wish to regain or maintain independence in their own residences. This is done through a combination of in-home training, referrals to other programs within the agency (such as the Low Vision Clinic and Mobility), and services outside the agency (such as

the Talking Book Service at the State Library.). Services routinely offered through the Older Blind counselor are home management training, communications skills training, counseling and guidance, and information and referral services, some of which were mentioned previously.

In February of 2010, the Rehabilitation Services Administration conducted a routine periodic audit of our agency. All departments were reviewed. As a result, there were several recommendations made and follow up was required. Our agency hired an RSA consultant to help advise the programs with the best ways to accomplish the goals set forth by the RSA audit. It took some time, but in October of the next year, in 2011, our Older Blind Program staff was notified that in order for us to comply with the requirements and recommendations made by RSA, the OB Program would have to significantly be streamlined, both in program scope, and in staff. The Older Blind Program went from a staff of eight counselors to four counselors. Each counselor would have to double their covered county territory. One counselor retired; the rest were graciously absorbed into the Vocational Rehabilitation Department, as they had an abundance of funding. So thankfully, no one lost their jobs.

Prior to October 2011, the Older Blind Program, was able to provide computer and assistive technology training for those who wished to receive training in this area. . During the initial assessment with the consumer, a determination was made as to the interest in computer training, as well as the other types of services offered. The plan of service, formally called the Individualized Plan of Independent Living (IPIL), was drafted.

From that point, the counselor made the necessary referrals to the department that provided that particular service. In the instance of computer and assistive technology training, the referral was submitted to the Training & Employment Department (T & E). T & E then took the referral from there onward providing routine updates to the counselor as to the consumer's progress. But after the audit results were enacted, that all changed.

The scope of service, following the streamlining, was drastically cut back too. The OB Program had been able to provide extensive computer training along with education on the use of assistive technology, whether they learned screen magnification software or screen reading software, as determined by an assessment before training commenced. Once the student successfully completed the training, a process that took anywhere from two weeks to several months, depending on their skill level, learning speed, and type of technology taught, they were provided with a computer and a copy of the software they learned. Once the computer and software were ordered and received, a specialist from the T & E Department delivered and set up the system for the consumer in their home. With the sudden changes, all of that was discontinued mid-stream and the program ended abruptly.

Current Status:

At this point in February 2016, there is still no program in place through the Commission for the Blind to aid those senior adults who would like to be able to continue to use their computers and learn the assistive technology that would make that possible. The agency has to go before the state legislature to request and justify the budget annually. This process can be very drawn out, especially when requesting new program funding.

The Problem:

Currently, at the SC Commission for the Blind, there is no opportunity for computer training for adults in the Older Blind Program, despite the ever-increasing need for technology as a part of daily functioning and independence.

On average, the OB Program serves approximately 700 people per year. This was the figure for the federal fiscal year of 2015, as reported in the 7OB report that is submitted to the RSA for review annually. Unfortunately, the statistics that could show how many of those received computer training prior to October 2011 are not available. The consumer database that stored the information is no longer accessible to our agency staff. A new system was established in 2012 and only the pertinent information was transferred over. Since the computer training program had ceased, the statistics were not transferred.

The Proposal:

In light of the computer-training deficit in the OB Program, and the length of time that has passed with no anticipated change in this service area in the foreseeable future, the time to remedy this situation is now. The Older Blind Program has to look for outside partners to make this service viable again.

With the wealth of regional senior and recreation centers in SC, I propose that the OB Program partner with those regional senior and recreation centers to establish a community-based training program that is both effective and is of minimal cost to the agency and to the partnering centers.

Initially, a pilot program will be created between SCCB and the James E. Clyburn Technology Center, a center operated by the Richland County Recreation Commission. In recent years, the JECTC has offered adults basic computer training in their facility. By starting with this well-established program, SCCB would offer to train the instructor on use of the computer with Dolphin Guide, a voice-guided screen reading software package that is especially suited for senior adults who are new to learning the computer, or who may need a long-overdue refresher. It is assumed that the instructor already has a strong grasp of basic computer use. Initially, the instructor(s) will be brought to SCCB for a three-day long intensive training on how to use Guide, and just

as importantly, how to teach it. Proficiency will be determined by a test of common commands at the close of training.

Once the community instructor goes back to the recreation/senior center, they will pass on their knowledge to the students they train.

The Process:

The OB counselor will assess the consumer for their needs upon the initial visit, as has been done throughout the program's history. Once an interest in the computer training is declared and added to the plan of service, the consumer will be notified of the nearest training center to them. The consumer will then be provided with the appropriate contact person and other relevant information. The counselor will be asked to contact the center to make the initial referral for the consumer's training. Once the referral is made, it is up to the center and consumer to keep in contact and work out the details of his or her training.

Once training has been completed, the consumer will be provided with information to purchase a computer and Guide software if desired. If the computer is not provided for the other computer trainees at the recreation/senior center, it will follow that it not be purchased for the blind or visually impaired trainees either. The converse is also true. This is the fair result of training for all.

Benefits of Community-Based Training vs. Agency-Based Training:

Service/Expense	Agency-Based Training Cost	Community-Based Training Cost	Difference
Transportation to and from class	OB pays the SCCB driver's hourly wage, about \$10.50/hour x 8hours per week (2 trips a day for 3 days a week).	Student is responsible for his or her own transportation.	\$84.00/week
Trainer's pay	OB pays the hourly cost for the trainer. Classes were held for 5 hours a day Tuesday through Thursday and 2.5 hours on Friday, a total of 17.5 hours. The agency paid \$24/hour for the trainer. The cost per week was \$420	The local center would pay the trainer.	\$420/week

Computer and accompanying software, accessories, etc.	Upon completion of the training, OB would purchase a new computer, scanner, and a copy of the Guide assistive software. This cost on average \$2500	The center or consumer would be responsible for the purchase of any software	\$2500
Guide software for training	SCCB already had a multi-site license for this software.	It may be necessary for SCCB to purchase the software for the centers. Once the software is purchased, it will be used for numerous trainees.	(850) per site
Total			\$6532 - \$850 = \$5682*

- Based on a two month training course with one student. Savings could be lessened if multiple students were taught at a time.

More Explanation of Savings and Costs:

- SCCB does not incur costs associated with purchasing the computer, related equipment, and the Guide software, a savings of \$2500.00. That is with the computer

costing around \$1500, Guide costing approximately \$850, and the scanner costing roughly \$150.)

- SCCB is not responsible for transporting the consumer to and from training. Being community-based, the consumer can work with the center to determine if transportation services are available. If not, it is a growth opportunity for the consumer to learn how to tap into resources to learn to ask for assistance when needed. Previously, the OB Program footed the costs for the driver's time.
- The OB Program will pay for two to three days of instructor training every 3 months at the most. This is much cheaper than paying for the trainer full time, lodging, meals, etc., as had been done in the past.

Potential Obstacles:

Though this program would be of minimal expense to the agency, there are several potential obstacles that could thwart its inception. One major hurdle being failure to get approval from agency management. As with many state agencies, it can take a long process to enact change. The benefits would have to be clearly defined and presented in a way that makes SCCB look innovative.

Additionally, the partnering organizations may not be willing to take on this task. They may not have available staff to be able to send for training. Their staff may also be limited in their basic computer knowledge that may impede their ability to conduct more specialized training. So, it may require more in-depth training than put forth in this

proposal. The partnering organizations may also want SCCB to split any costs for the software. They may not see the cost of the software as enough to offset the positives of training the blind senior population.

The last major hurdle may be the lack of available transportation. Though this is a major benefit of many local centers, not all may provide this service. This would negatively impact the proposed program.

Program Evaluation:

Initially, this program will be promoted in the Columbia area. With this being a large metropolitan area for the state, it is reasonable to aspire to have two participants per quarter. This would be eight in a 12-month period. At the end of the 12 month period, representatives from the agency and the local senior center would meet and evaluate whether this is a reasonable number of participants, whether more could be accommodated, if more staff would be necessary, if more transportation is needed for those additional trainees, and whether the funding is adequate to provide the level of training needed to help those involved regain their independence.

Summary:

With the Older Blind Program taking the initiative to establish community partnerships throughout the state, the ongoing problem of not being able to provide computer training to seniors will end, or at the very least be lessened. By being able to go outside of the

scope of services that are provided, to be able to take advantage of services and training already established in the more rural areas of the state, this proposal seeks to help seniors regain their confidence and connectedness with family, friends, and the online world at large. Opportunities for improvement in self-esteem, ability to perform daily tasks (such as bill paying), and ability to order goods for home delivery all serve to aid the consumer in being to take back control of their lives and personal affairs. That is what our agency is here for, after all.